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ABSTRACT

Teacher educators and others concerned with the present-day school reform movement may profit from a consideration of the leadership styles, psychological make-up, motivation, work habits, and personal charisma of some of the reformers of the past century. This paper examines the work of Horace Mann and attempts to juxtapose elements of his leadership style against the work of some of his ideological heirs today. Mann overcame poor schooling to graduate valedictorian of his class at Brown University. He graduated from law school and set up practice in Boston. In 1937, he was invited to become the first salaried executive and secretary of the Massachusetts State Board of Education. Although the job was only an advisory position, Mann saw an opportunity to improve the lives of multitudes. In 1838, Mann rode through Massachusetts and found school houses in deplorable conditions, a lack of textbooks, poor teachers, and the attitude that school was a waste of time. The wealthy did not support Mann in his efforts to improve educational standards and accused him of trying to buy votes of the poor. Nevertheless, Mann transplanted his findings into legislation which called for better support of schools and urged revision of the state education code. After Mann's first year all his recommendations were turned into law, and his programs received the attention of social and political leaders. Mann's most significant achievement was to replace the private academy with the public high school, but the real significance of Mann's work is that he established a social and political base for public education when most leaders thought it impractical or thought private academies offered better instruction with little tax support. (APG)

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PROFILES IN LEADERSHIP

by

Ruskin Teeter

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A Profile in Educational Leadership

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School-loving Americans take school reform seriously, and it is perfectly in keeping with the theme of our program today, I believe, to look back to the last century to the life and work of perhaps the greatest of all the American school reformers, Horace Mann. It may be useful to assess his leadership style, psychological make-up, motivation, work habits, and personal charisma, and to juxtapose those elements of style against similar ones of his modern day counterparts. Perhaps some inferences as to the appropriateness of diverse styles of leadership (to the work of school reform) can thereby be drawn.

As I examine Mann's life and work, perhaps you can at the same time be turning over in your own mind the work of one or two of today's most prominent reformers--there are scores of names from which to draw. Then, toward the end of the hour, we might compare and contrast their work with the work of Mann, with a view to assessing the likely long-term impact of the moderns.

Horace Mann, of course, was an anomaly, and the 200-year tradition of support for free public elementary (common) schools which had existed even before his birth, had in no way produced excellence in any aspect of education. Most school buildings were inadequately built and equipped, and many were unfit for occupancy. Compulsory attendance laws were not enforced, and thousands of children worked 90-hour weeks in mills and

factories. At the heart of such problems was a pinch-penny, apathetic tax-paying public.

Like so many of his contemporaries, Horace Mann rose above such conditions. His education in a Massachusetts rural school had been so poor that his mother was obliged to hire an itinerant schoolmaster to tutor him for Brown University's entrance examination. In Mann's recollection, that teacher was often "too drunk to teach." But he was a brilliant classicist--he had committed most of Virgil to memory--and he was able to coach young Mann to a passing score on the examination. Once admitted to the Rhode Island University, Mann compiled a brilliant record and was elected valedictorian of the 1819 grduating class. Afterward, Mann taught for two years, but students disliked him almost from the beginning. He was rather overbearing at that age; he was glib and bitingly sarcastic; he lorded it over his students at every turn; he dressed like a "dandy" and strutted back and forth in his classroom pontificating on every subject; and he gave students low marks and outrageously difficult assignments as if to point up their many weaknesses and his own strengths. When they had finally had enough of him, they hooted and hollered him from the classroom. When he later resigned, one student wrote (without a trace of regret) that Mann had "resigned his tutorial dignities." Once free of the tensions of teaching, Mann blossomed. His undergraduate record at Brown won him a seat at Judge Tapping Reeve's law school in Litchfield, Connecticut. This one-room, white frame school, which sat in the back yard of the judge's home (and which still stands today) was

the first law school in the United States. (It was established in 1784; Aaron Burr had been the school's first student, and John C. Calhoun and three future Supreme Court justices would also study there). Mann excelled in his studies at Litchfield. He matured "beyond measure" from his teaching days, and he became one of the best-read and most popular students at the school; he was acknowledged to be a "fast-study," the brightest student in school. Moreover, he was tall, handsome, "intolerably witty," one student remembered, and he was widely sought out at parties and social functions for his glibness and gifts for conversation and repartee. He was an immaculate dresser, and was remembered by a number of girls who attended a nearby "female seminary" as being a "charmer," much given to wine, card games and good cigars.

After graduation, Mann moved to Boston and set up a law practice. During the next few years, he married the daughter of the president of his alma mater, built up a first-rate law practice, and accumulated a sizable fortune from lending money and manufacturing. He moved easily among the Boston elite, and at age 31 was elected to the state legislature. Swept up by the climate of human and institutional reform of that time, he actively supported the establishment of the first state hospital for "lunatics and persons furiously mad" in the United States. He was on his way to becoming governor of Massachusetts, it was widely acknowledged, and it was assumed that he then could have any national office he wanted. But then tragedy struck, and Mann would never be the same again--his young and much-loved wife died. Increasigly, throughout the 1830's, he drew inward. He

became an ascetic. Preferring solitude, he dropped out of Boston's social whirl. He became more and more morose and depressed. He neglected his law practice and other businesses. He began to think of suicide, and he wondered aloud in his diary how much longer he was "doomed to live." "When, oh when, will this life cease," he wrote. He began to hallucinate, writing again in his diary that he felt himself being "carried away by demons to the centre of universal darkness." Mann became, in effect, something of a tormented genius. By 1837, he was at the end of his tether. He had begun to move, he wrote in his diary, in a "world of shadows and gloomy images." Physically and emotionally, he had sunk to his lowest ebb.

Then, in 1837, his friends in the Massachusetts Legislature established a 10-member State Board of Education, the first of its kind in the country, and invited Mann to become its first salaried executive and secretary. The pay was a pittance, and the work--riding horseback all over the state documenting the condition of Massachusetts schools--would be grueling. Moreover, it was an advisory position only; it carried with it no power or opportunities to exercise initiatives. It meant a lot of "privation, labor and infinite annoyance from an infinite number of schemers," Mann wrote. Yet, there was also a chance to do much good, he believed, seeing more to the low-level, innocuous job than anyone else at the time. Indeed, Mann wrote in his diary, here was a chance to do "glorious deeds," to do work that would improve the lives of the "multitudes." He took the job, and wrote in his diary that he was abandoning law for what he saw

as the "larger spheres of minds and morals." Henceforth, he wrote in the sure language of a visionary, "as long as I hold this office, I devote myself to the supermost welfare of mankind upon the earth." Perhaps only visionaries see opportunities to serve "mankind" in such trifling, bureaucratic work as the job accepted by Mann.

Mann took up his new mission with appropriate zeal. He announced the formation of the new State Board of Education, and the forthcoming county conventions it would sponsor. He himself made plans to visit every county and hundreds of schools throughout the state. Massachusetts schools were the best in the country, it was widely acknowledged, and if they were bad, as only he suspected (doubtless because of his problems years earlier in getting into Brown University), then the schools of the entire country were in even worse shape. He sent letters to friends all over the state suggesting how they might promote better schools in their own communities. He read widely in order to determine what might be the best new roads to take in the areas of school building construction, textbooks and curricula. He gave support to any organization or political group which could help with his work, among these the American Institute of Instruction; and he began to reorganize local common school improvement associations. Then he began to secure from leading local citizens--ministers, newspaper editors and businessmen--endorsements for the work he was about to undertake.

In 1838, Mann rode circuit for two months. In dawn-to-dusk, 20-mile-per-day rides, he traveled through western Massachusetts visiting schools and talking with local officials. He spoke to

every audience he could gather. Public schools, he told them, were a necessary foundation for democracy; they were "equalizers" and creators of wealth, and they were an untapped resource for the moral and civic training of youth. To the poor, he promised that education was a means for acquiring property; to the rich, he emphasized that only the educated would respect property. By doubling his Saturday rides to 40 miles to avoid Sunday travel (which custom forbade though his own religious views did not), he traveled more than 500 miles, an enormous distance considering that many of the roads he traveled were little more than pig trails. But the fatiguing and wearisome work, which even wore out Mann's horse, was therapeutic for him. The bouts of despondency that had altered his youthful demeanor after the death of his wife (and business reverses and problems with his brother) now became less frequent and less severe. After only a few weeks on his new mission he wrote his sister: "I confess I feel now more as though life had a value, and as though I had a specific work to do."

Mann's circuit trip had been a revelation. He found the most deplorable conditions in the very schools which were thought to be the best in the nation. As many as 15 children were often crowded into a 14-by-18 foot space; equipment beyond the standard stove, a few tables and benches, and a water pail and dipper were almost non-existent; and many schools, both town and country, lacked even a water well or the amenity of an outhouse. His survey of more than 500 Essex County schoolhouses revealed that in those particulars which contribute to even the most basic

comforts and conveniences of life, convicts at the state prison were better provided for than the children of Massachusetts. The average worth of a New England schoolhouse (in 1980 dollars) was somewhat less than $200. He found a hopeless "textbook" situation--each child providing his own when and if circumstances permitted. In one small school, Mann found 15 geography books and eight grammar books, all of comparable difficulty, but all produced by different authors and publishers. Free and uniform textbooks were unheard of, indeed, unwanted, since parents were suspicious of what the state might have their chidren read. He also learned with little surprise that men teachers were paid $15 per month, and women half as much. As a result, that profession was crowded with the very dregs, the down-and-outers of society. Exceptions like the young Henry Thoreau and Herman Melville, who taught at Concord and Pittsfield, soon quit in disgust--Thoreau after only two weeks on the job, and Melville after four months.

At the heart of the dilemma of poor schoolhouses and poor teachers was the attitude of many parents that schools were a waste of time so far as the real business of earning a living was concerned. They believed that a few winter terms at a district school were quite enough education for those who would only farm or work in the factories anyway. The wealthy were often as distrustful of schools as the poor. Some of the state's most prominent citizens had nothing but contempt for Mann and his work to lift up the masses. One attorney told him that the primary duty of the privileged was to "prevent ingress" into the ranks of the privileged by the riff-raff. Reflecting a climate of opinion in which Social Darwinism would soon flourish, many believed that

the condition of most of mankind was the working of immutable laws of nature; that is, that most people were destined to live in vulgar circumstances, while a few, by virtue of their birth and position, were destined sternly to guide or benevolently lead the ignorant masses. Some of New England's gentry branded Mann as just another demagogue reformer exploiting the weak and downtrodden for their votes. Indeed, it was an ironic coalition of the ignorant and the well-educated that opposed Mann at every turn and did all in their power to obstruct educational reform.

When he delivered his first annual report to the State Board of Education in 1838, Mann had inspected--and he knew firsthand--the condition of more than 1,000 Massachusetts schools. His intimate knowledge of their almost unbelievable limitations, and his factual, scientifically unemotional presentation quickly convinced the Board that despite the claims of politicians, the state had not conscientiously supported schools for the past 200 years, but indeed had neglected them with almost total disregard. The "best" schools in the country, so long New England's pride, were in fact an abomination. Indifference and carelessness had left them in a shameful state. Although politicians had boasted for generations about the state's model schools, such accounts had only been political bluster. The Board encouraged former Senator Mann to translate his findings into remedial legislation. Mann submitted a steady stream of proposals, and in doing so, became one of the first educational lobbyists in history. Like his many successors in that role, he called for better administrative and financial support of schools. Some

communities, he pointed out, kept 16-week school terms, and others only four or fewer; some spent $5 per child per annum on education, and some spent only a few cents. He also spoke out against competing private academies, the educational establishment of the day, saying that they hindered the growth of education for the masses, and that public schools could do a better job of educating children anyway. He called for better school boards (pay members if necessary, he said); he called for the consolidation of literally thousands of small schools into larger and better schools, having found on his circuit ride eight schools within walking distance of a single small town. Schools should have playgrounds, water wells, wood sheds, outhouses and clocks, he said. They should keep attendance and financial records, and submit these to the state board each year. Drawing upon his earlier experience in the senate, he secured the appointment of legislators friendly to his programs as members of important legislative committees. He personally urged them to support revision of the state's fragmented education code. That statute consisted of more than 70 sections and dealt with everything from teacher certification requirements to a requirement that college students pay cash for their beer. He called for free and standardized textbooks.

Mann also raised money from private sources to help establish teacher training or "normal" schools, that word deriving from the Latin noun norma, meaning rule, pattern or model. (Hence, a normal school was where one learned the rules or the "how-to's" of teaching). He also had draftsmen draw plans for three model school buildings, all providing generous space,

lighting, seating and ventilation, and distributed these plans to more than 6,000 school districts with the suggestion that many of the old structures be abandoned, and new structures built. By doing so he brought about the construction of hundreds of new school buildings in the state.

Mann's first year was an impressive achievement: as he jubilantly wrote to a friend, all of his recommendations were turned into law. But more importantly, he had captured the imagination of people all over the state; he had fired them up, and got them talking about and working to improve the condition of the state's schools. Moreover, he was beginning to attract the attention of social and political leaders, not only in other parts of the country, but around the world.

Mann's most significant achievement was to set the machinery in motion to replace the private academy with the public high school, the term "high school" being copied from the name Edinburgh, Scotland, had given its secondary school, the "Royal High School," which was founded in the 1500's. The first American high school, however, was called the "English Classical School," meaning that it offered both an "English" and a "Latin" course of study. The school was founded in Boston in 1821. To get into this school, students had to know the three R's and be at least 12 years of age. In the course of three years, they studied English grammar, speech, literature, mathematics, navigation, surveying, geography, history and ethics. (Perhaps as a comment on the glaring lack in our own times, it should be noted that students were spared the trauma of foreign languages).

High schools experienced slow growth initially against the still-prestigious academy. Moreover, with the coming of the high school (which was indigenous to the U.S.), the grammar school (which was indigenous to Europe, and which originally was aristocratic and exclusive), took on a new shape and form. Now, the grammar school became an elementary school, and high schools came to be seen as an extension of these grammar or elementary schools.

The real significance of Mann's life and work is that he established a social and political base for public education. He did this under the most difficult of conditions, during the very heyday of private academies, when most leaders were declaring that it would be suicidal to lavish state resources on public schools since the existing private academies offered better instruction, required almost no tax support, and were "better adjusted to the character, habits, and wants of the country."